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AUTHOR Hinds, Lillian R.; Blass, Rosanne J.
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ABSTRACT

The results of a follow-up study on local school district development and implementation of minimal competency testing (MCT) programs are reported. Critical questions regarding: (1) motivation and purposes; (2) selection of tests, procedures, and standards; and (3) impact, follow-up, and change are examined. The follow-up study investigated procedures used by local school districts establishing minimal competency testing programs in targeted areas of the United States. Questionnaires were mailed to 90 local school districts identified as developing MCT programs. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 local school districts identified as having actually implemented programs. In effect, the follow-up study updated a previous study and identified those characteristics which current minimal competency testing practitioners believe to be most important to the perceived or demonstrated success of their MCT programs. The follow-up study strongly indicated that MCT program developers take into account not only the experience of other program developers but also, the special needs of their own community. The consequences of poor planning, planning in isolation, and of a low budget will be, at best, a minimally effective program and, at worst, serious court tests of the implemented program. (Author/GK)

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MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING: LOCAL SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IN TARGETED AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES

Dr. Lillian R. Hinds
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, Ohio 44115

Dr. Rosanne J. Blass
Allegheny College Instruction Center
The Alcazar - Surrey & Derbyshire
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44106

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a follow-up study on local school district development and implementation of minimal competency testing programs. It examines critical questions regarding: 1) motivation and purposes; 2) selection of tests, procedures, and standards; 3) impact, follow-up, and change.

The follow-up study investigated procedures used by local school districts establishing minimal competency testing programs in targeted areas of the United States. Questionnaires were mailed to 90 local school districts identified as developing MCT programs. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 local school districts identified as having actually implemented programs. In effect, the follow-up study updated a previous study and identified those characteristics which current minimal competency testing practioners believe to be most important to the perceived or demonstrated success of their MCT programs.

In conclusion, the follow-up study strongly indicated that MCT program developers take into account not only the experience of other program developers but also, the special needs of their own community. The consequences of poor planning, planning in isolation, and of a low budget will be, at best, a minimally effective program and, at worst, serious court tests of the implemented program.

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This paper summarizes the final report of a study conducted by the Research Committee of the Greater Cleveland (Ohio) Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa. Copies of the final report Current Practices in the Implementation of Minimal Competency Testing Programs may be requested from Dr. Kenneth Osicki, 4868 Summer Lane, Brooklyn, Ohio 44144. Members of the Research Committee contributing to this study include: Thomas Anderson, Rosanne Blass, Richard Boyd, Daniel Drake, Wilhelmina Goff, Lillian Hinds, Dean Kelly, Richard McArdle, Gerald Martau, Harrison Means, Kenneth Osicki, Marvin Pasch, Michael Voinovich, Lucretia Wood.

MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING: LOCAL SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IN TARGETED AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES

When the Research Committee of the Greater Cleveland (Ohio) Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa published the results of its year long study of the competency testing movement in Cuyahoga County, Ohio (1978), at least 38 states plau the District of Columbia were implementing minimal competency testing programs. The issues of competency testing had, at that time, emerged from some years of MCT experience in a few districts nationwide and were fueled by continuing and distressing reports of declining Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. In an effort to reverse these declines a vocal public began to demand greater school accountability, especially in the basic skills of reading and mathematics. These demands for educational accountability did not fall on deaf ears. State legislators began to successfully agitate for mandated MCT programs as a means of ensuring that high school graduates have a firm foundation of basic skills.

The Phi Delta Kappa study (1978, p.38) concluded that those school districts which were considering the establishment of MCT programs were "aware of the need for extensive involvement by teachers, parents, and consultants in the development and maintenance of the testing program." But, of the nine recommendations which followed, none dealt with the problem of what a district should do between exploration of the concept and actual implementation.

The fact that MCT decisions cannot be hastily made is a point established by many authors. Recent court cases suggest that those who are developing

MCT programs should proceed with greater deliberation. The Johnson case in Florida resulted in some states slowing their move toward MCT (Seligman, 1979). When this case was finally decided in July, 1979, competency testing was actually strengthened in most states. In its decision the court "upheld the graduation requirements in general, but ruled that the Florida program was imposed too hastily (Time, 1979). Consequently, most authorities believe that some form of competency testing is here to stay rather than being a passing fad.

In recognition of the wide spread use of MCT programs, the Greater Cleveland Inter-University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa decided to investigate procedures used by local school districts establishing MCT programs in targeted areas of the United States. In effect, the proposed work would update the 1978 publication and identify those characteristics which present MCT users feel were most important to the perceived or demonstrated success of their MCT programs. The chapter chose to survey local rather than regional or state efforts because: 1) sufficient emphasis and investigation had been directed towards state programs, 2) chapter membership interests rested almost exclusively with locally developed programs.

PROCEDURES

Questionnaires were mailed to 90 school districts identified as developing MCT programs in targeted areas of the United States. Returns were summarized and an open-ended interview type of questionnaire was constructed based on the results. 27 districts, representing a range of district size and in different stages of MCT implementation, were selected for in-depth study. Information was obtained from 16 of these by 1) personal interview,

2) telephone interview, or 3) written response. Interview information was summarized and used in conjunction with the preliminary questionnaire results to identify characteristics of successful programs. For the purpose of identifying these characteristics the questionnaire and interview items were grouped into three categories: 1) Motivation and Purposes; 2) Selection of Competencies, Tests, Standards and Procedures; 3) Impact, Follow-Up, and Change.

SUMMARY OF MCT QUESTIONNAIRE #1

Questionnaires were sent to 90 school districts across the United States. Returns were received from 61 districts for a return of 68 percent. Of the respondents 62% identified themselves with MCT to some degree. 94% indicated that they would support the data collection process. Enrollments of responding eistricts ranged from 715 to 500,000 for a total enrollment of almost 2 million students. Although most responses were from Ohio schools, questionnaires were returned from districts in Utah, North Carolina, Illinois, Indiana, Colorado, Texas, West Virginia, Nebraska, Michigan, Oregon.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSES

Respondents were almost equally divided between those who had developed and implemented MCT programs and those who were still in study, planning, and development stages. Over half of the respondents indicated that they were testing or planning to test basic skills. Others were almost equally divided between Life/Survival Skills and School Subjects. Respondents indicated that they were testing across grade levels, K-12, with the majority testing in Grades 3,8,9,10,11.

STANDARDS, SELECTION, AND PROCEDURES

The majority of respondents indicated that MCT results will not be used for promotion (65.3%) or graduation (50%). The remainder indicated that they were undecided regarding promotion (12.2%) and graduation (11.1%). Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they were using locally developed tests. Of those using standardized tests one/third had selected the California Achievement Test. 90.4% indicated that they were planning remedial assistance programs.

SUMMARY OF MCT INTERVIEWS

27 school districts, representing a range of district sizes and in different stages of MCT implementation, were selected for in-depth study. Information was obtained from 16 of these by 1) personal interview, 2) telephone interview, or 3) written response.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSES

Motivation. Most districts agreed that the primary motivating force for beginning MCT programs was media reports regarding poor educational performance in reading and mathematics. Local examples of poor basic skill performance in the work place provided additional motivation. Respondents were divided as to the origin of their local movement. These origina included: 1) state mandates and local initiatives; 2) administrator and teacher concerns; 3) administrative responsibility; 4) school board initiatives.

Purposes. The consensus of respondents was that the purposes or goals of an MCT program should be comprehensive in nature. It was further recog-

nized that particular attention should be given to diagnosis and remediation of basic skills. Most respondents indicated that the focus of MCT was on students and implications for curriculum and instruction rather than school or teacher performance.

STANDARDS, SELECTION OF COMPETENCIES, TESTS, AND PROCEDURES

Standards. Decisions regarding the establishment of standards generally resulted from group efforts. These groups consisted of school and community representatives or school personnel and an external advisor. Pilot testng was used to determine if preliminary standards were realistic. Special student groups such as special education students were considered when standards were established.

Selection of Competencies. As with standards, selection of competencies was also reported as requiring group effort. Local needs assessments, experts, and analysis of subject matter were reported as sources for competencies to be considered. Also reported were state mandates which defined desirable minimum competency levels which should be the target of MCT programs.

Tests and Procedures. Most districts indicated that they utilized district developed tests and procedures, but only one respondent specifically indicated that their tests and procedures were developed directly from their goal statements. Other sources reported were state developed tests or standardized tests. In several of the reporting districts local goals and objectives were utilized by commercial test construction companies to develop tests specifically designed to meet local needs.

IMPACT, FOLLOW-UP, AND CHANGE

Impact. School districts indicated that, to date, minimal competency testing has been generally well received by the public. Respondents reported: 1) existence of general community support; 2) generally favorable impact on community groups; 3) focus on standardization of courses and more appropriate use of tests; 4) curriculum impact. They noted, however, that greater attention must be paid to improving communications with parents and with special interest groups in order to derive and define the many facets of MCT in more specific and clearer terms. Ongoing efforts to continue and improve these efforts are necessary in order to realize specified goals.

Follow-up. Although extensive longitudinal evaluations have not been possible because MCT programs have been in operation for only a few years (or less!) the data which is available supports the contention that such programs can help increase test scores. Respondents reported that the number of students meeting set standards has also been increasing in many of the districts interviewed. While follow-up studies were encouraging they identified some natural concerns: 1) data collection seems to be a very weak part of MCT programs: 2) adequate funding has been a serious problem; 3) the short term of most MCT programs has made valid longitudinal studies incomplete, at best, and, for the most part, not yet possible.

Change. Responses strongly suggest that the normal evolution of MCT programs requires planned change based on observed results, newly identified community needs, and other input derived from education, community, and public relations activities. Specific areas cited by the respondents as

areas requiring change include: 1) improvement of data collection techniques; 2) improvement of funding levels; 3) improved communications with parents and special interest groups.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL MCT IMPLEMENTATION

The 16 school districts which responded to in-depth interviews were asked to identify MCT program characteristics which contributed to successful MCT implementation. Based on the assumption that interview respondents represent a cross-section of local district MCT implementation, interview data was analyzed in conjunction with the preliminary questionnaire data and characteristics contributing to successful MCT implementation were identified. These characteristics are organized under the general headings: 1) Motivation and Purposes; 2) Standards, Selection, and Procedures; 3) Impact, Follow-Up, and Change.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSES

Implemented programs are:

1. Responsive to local needs rather than state mandates.
2. Preceded or accompanied by curriculum change.
3. At least, in part, based upon a spirit of diagnosis and remediation.
4. Supported by the Superintendent and through resolutions by the Board of Education.

STANDARDS, SELECTION OF COMPETENCIES, TESTS AND PROCEDURES

Implemented programs:

1. Are developed after consultation with and in co-operation with teachers, parents, students, community members and consultants.
2. Set performance standards and cut-off scores based upon local

experiences, e.g., pilot testing.

3. Employ a team approach to the writing of standards, competencies, tests, and other procedures.

IMPACT, FOLLOW-UP, AND CHANGE

Implemented programs are:

1. Successful in achieving community support.
2. Establishing a spirit of district and school accountability.
3. Increasing teacher and curriculum planners' skills in diagnosis and remediation.
4. Expanding their MCT programs to other grade levels and expanding the scope of remediation and curriculum change.
5. Recognizing improvements in student basic skill performance.
6. Recognizing problems for future attack.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School districts that consider development and implementation of an MCT program must resolve, first, to assign the appropriate personnel and time to the task. Personnel should include district educators, community persons, and out-of-district educators. Consultants who may be required should be identified and used early in the planning stages. As planning progresses, consideration must be given to all of the information gathered from citizens, students, and educators.

Secondly, legal issues should be carefully reviewed. Court attacks on the requirement to pass tests as a prerequisite to receiving a diploma have become more common. Other issues which may require resolution through court action include testing for handicapped students, teacher accountability,

racial and cultural discrimination, content validity of tests, and length of phase-in period. Although most MCT programs are state mandated, it appears that most legal challenges will be made at the local district level.

Finally the economic impact of an adequately developed and implemented MCT program must be prudently considered. Miller (1978) warned of asking for a "Cadillac Model," but allowing only a "Model T" budget. Walter B. Waetjen (1979), President of Cleveland State University, posed a similar warning in similarly colorful language.

> People's attitude toward education has been the reverse of their attitude toward war. We proclaim that education is the ultimate of all human tasks, that its impact on the happiness and prosperity of a society are monumental and that its values transcend all others.
>
> Then we proceed cautiously to confine education to a little book learning and dole it out in bargain lots to groups privileged in certain economic and social ways.
>
> We serve education timidly. We do not shoot the works as we do in war. We shoot four bits and then gripe that our winnings are small.

CONCLUSION

Three significant factors emerge as contributing to successful MCT program development and implementation: 1) responsiveness to local needs; 2) teamwork; 3) selection of competencies, tests, standards, and procedures consistent with curriculum and instruction as well as with program goals or purposes. It is critical that development activities take into account not only the experiences of other MCT developers but, also, of the special needs of their own community. The consequences of poor planning, planning in isolation, and of a low budget will be, at best, a minimally effective program and, at worst, serious court tests of the implemented program.

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